

An Evaluation of the Effects of Life Space Crisis Intervention on the Challenging Behavior of Individual Students

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This study assessed the effects of Life Space Crisis Interventions on the challenging behavior of four students with learning handicaps attending a special school in Germany. Students were in seventh and tenth grades and exhibited an array of challenging, disruptive classroom behaviors. After the implementation of interventions, major improvement in behavior was observed. It is hypothesized that the crisis intervention procedure fostered relationship building between teacher and student that contributed to the reduction of challenging behavior.

Life-Space Crisis Intervention is a therapeutically orientated strategy designed to solve social-emotional conflicts within the classroom (Goetze, 2001). Originally named "psychiatric marginal interview," the Life-Space Interview (LSI) was developed in the United States by Fritz Redl after fleeing Nazi Austria (Redl, 1966; 1978; 1979). The method was further developed by Wood and Long (1991) and Long and Fecser (1996), who gave it its present name, Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI), and is implemented through a series of six steps.

LSCI is a verbal strategy practiced immediately after a conflict becomes apparent in the life space of the child, the natural ecological environment in which learning takes place. Immediately following a crisis, the student is still immersed in the emotions and cognitions of the crisis, has not yet cooled down, and may spontaneously react in a way that his or her defense mechanisms will become apparent and can be used to develop solutions. The overall goal of LSCI is to work through a conflict in order to gain emotional insights, so in similar future incidences, the student will feel, think, and behave in a different way. The student is encouraged to use words, not actions, to describe the conflict and to work for solutions.

Besides anecdotal reports (Graham & Singer, 1981), empirical research on LSCI is scant (see Gardner, 1990, and in response, Long, 1990). In an early publication, Morse and Small (1959) reported on the use of group LSCI for seven weeks in a boys' camp. Ninety "disturbed" boys aged 8 to 15 participated. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours and were prompted by incidents of verbal and physical aggression. Authors concluded that LSCI was an effective means to reduce delinquent behavior. Another early study focused on 6 boys in a sheltered home who behaved extremely aggressively towards peers and adults (Long, Stroeffler, Krause, & Jung, 1961). The authors reported that conducting LSCIs turned the educational institution and program around. The authors claimed that the application of LSCI was very effective in reducing aggression in the boys, although data were not presented to support this conclusion.

Three studies have reported data in their evaluations of LSCI. DeMagistris and Imber (1980) used LSCI with 8 boys who showed refusal, confrontation, arguing, work interruptions, and immature behavior. Data were collected in the mornings for nine weeks. Two groups received LSCI for four weeks, followed by a non-intervention phase. A third group

was used for control, with no LSCI. The interviews were conducted for periods of 10 to 30 minutes. Results showed that disturbances decreased (between 31 and 72 percent) and attending and work behavior increased for the experimental groups, but not for the control group. The authors concluded that the LSCI intervention was highly effective.

Naslund (1987) and Dawson (2003) reported the effectiveness of LSCI with students with emotional and behavioral disorders in public schools. Naslund conducted 1441 LSCI interviews with 28 primary students with behavior disorders in a school year, interviewing, on average, 9 students per day. Interviews were conducted for problems with peers, self-control, and rules and norms (reality perception, social skill instruction, confronting unacceptable behavior, self-control instruction, and exposing exploitation by peers). Results showed that the reasons for conducting LSCIs changed over time. The use of reality confrontation interviews decreased, whereas interviews for social skills training increased. Naslund also reported that for 13 students, the necessity to conduct LSCIs decreased, whereas for 14 boys, the necessity increased due to their externalizing behavior problems. Intelligence was a factor in determining demand for LSCI with those students with higher IQs having greater demand than those with average IQ. Unfortunately, this study could not show the effectiveness of LSCI with this population due to methodological issues. It did not include a measure of student behavior or a control group.

Dawson (2003) compared a junior high school for students with emotional disorders using LSCI with one using a curriculum of control (i.e., level system and time-out). After a semester of LSCI, the experimental school had fewer student crises, fewer suspensions, better attendance, and higher numbers of students receiving their education in mainstreamed and less restrictive environments. An additional outcome of this study was that teachers and staff reported feeling more qualified to deal with students in crisis as a result of the LSCI training. The effectiveness of LSCI was demonstrated through indirect measures and based on averages of groups of students. What has yet to be demonstrated is the effectiveness of LSCI on the direct behavior of individual students.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of LSCI with single-subject methodology by

monitoring the behavior of individual students (Julius, Schlosser, & Goetze, 2000). A multiple baseline across subjects design (Alberto & Troutman, 2003) was used to assess the effects of the treatment on disruptive classroom behavior.

Method

Participants and Baseline

Four students participated, two tenth-grade boys and two seventh-grade girls, each attending a special school for the learning handicapped in Germany. Students with learning handicaps in Germany are identified through an extensive team procedure that includes the assessment of IQ capacity, norm- and curriculum-based achievement, and social performance. A student is identified as having a learning handicap if he or she has an IQ score within the range of 70 and 85 and demonstrates severe achievement deficits. At the special schools, the school day runs from 8:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and students are taught an alternative curriculum.

Sam was 16 years, 2 months old and was in the tenth grade. He lived in a small apartment with his single mother, whom he dominated. He had attended the special school since the eighth grade. In the classroom he engaged in externalizing behavior and aggression.

Peter was also a 16-year old tenth grader and had attended a special school for students with learning handicaps since seventh grade. His mother died when he was seven years old and he had a difficult relationship with his alcoholic father, who did not maintain communication with the school. An offer to live in a sheltered home was refused by the boy. Peter was part of a gang of peers who used alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Peter demonstrated dislike for school, test anxiety, low learning motivation, and high levels of depression, delinquency, and aggression on the Teacher Report Form (TRF) of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). Peter had not yet learned to follow social rules.

Flo was 13 years, 5 months old and in the seventh grade. She repeated fifth grade and changed schools during that time. Her school achievement was average. Flo was the youngest of five children, three of them living with their single mother in a low-income household. Flo had a good relationship with her

mother, who tended to be overprotective. On the TRF, Flo had elevated scores in anxiety, depression, schizophrenic behavior, and aggression, but scores on ADHD, social problems, and somatic complaints were also elevated. She demonstrated anxiety in exam situations.

Charlotte was a 13-year, 9-month-old seventh grader, had repeated the fourth grade, and was identified as having a learning handicap. Teachers reported Charlotte had mood swings from withdrawal and work refusal to aggression. Charlotte lived in an intact family with a younger brother and sister. Her parents communicated with the teacher but had negative attitudes toward her label of learning handicap and visited doctors and psychologists in attempts to find solutions to her learning problems. On the TRF, Charlotte showed symptoms of anxiety, depression, and aggression. She scored at the 96th percentile for test anxiety on the Anxiety Questionnaire for Students (Wieczerkowski, Nickel, Janowski, Fittkau, & Rauer, 1981). Both Flo and Charlotte entered the special school during the current school year.

Procedures

Two multiple baseline-across-subjects designs were employed to evaluate the effects of LSCI on the two girl and two boy participants separately. Data were collected in the classroom over a three-month period. There were nine students in the tenth grade class and 12 students in the seventh grade. A behavior management system using tokens was already in place prior to and during the LSCI intervention. During a 45-minute math class, a trained co-teacher sat in the back of the classroom and observed and recorded data for each of the male participants. The girl participants were observed during 45-minute physics and chemistry classes by the same co-teacher.

The dependent measure was discrete events of challenging behavior that was operationalized individually for each student. For Sam, data were collected on incidents of negative comments on others' contributions, verbal challenges of students and teachers, (e.g., You are too dumb to write something on the board; You read like my dog; I'll meet you in the hallway after class; Mrs. P., if you tell my parents, I'll meet you in the dark), shouting out in class, and verbal and physical aggression (e.g., punching, hitting with fists). During baseline, these behaviors ranged from 11 to 23 events per 45-minute class session.

For Peter, challenging behavior was defined as verbal provocations during lessons, refusal to work, and punctuality. The baseline frequency of behavior scores ranged between 11 and 17 events per 45-minute class session.

Flo's challenging behaviors were obscene remarks, shouting out in class, verbal challenges of schoolmates, and refusal to work, and ranged between 16 and 23 events per class during baseline. For Charlotte, challenging behavior was defined as verbal provocation, shouting at peers and teachers, leaving her workplace without permission, and refusal to work. There was a range of 18 to 26 target behaviors per class for Charlotte. Baseline data collection continued for each participant until a crisis occurred.

Sam's crisis occurred when he reached a peak of 23 challenging behaviors during one class period, making it difficult for teaching to take place. The LSCI chosen for Sam was Confrontation of Unacceptable Behavior. All interventions were conducted in the principal's office by the school principal, who was trained in LSCI, and also served as the classroom teacher for the participants. Sam's interview occurred immediately following the class.

Peter's crisis occurred after six days of baseline when he arrived late for school, refused to work, and acted aggressively toward the teacher. Peter's LSCI intervention for Social Skill Deficits was conducted at the beginning of school, prior to Math class.

For Flo and Charlotte, baseline lasted four and seven days, respectively. Seven days following her first intervention, Flo received a second intervention due to an increase in her challenging behavior after the first. The first intervention, Confrontation with Reality, followed an incident on the school bus where Flo verbally and physically attacked another girl. This crisis continued into the time-out room, where Flo was aggressive toward the physical environment. The second LSCI intervention, Social Skill Deficits, also followed an incident where Flo showed extreme externalizing behaviors. In this situation, Flo asked for help because she did not know how to handle the problem situation by herself. The Red Flag intervention was chosen for Charlotte because it was believed her conflicts at school were related to frustrations from home.

Results

As Figures 1 and 2 show, there was a radical decrease in challenging behavior for each participant after implementation of the LSCI. For Sam, a baseline mean of 16.3 inappropriate behaviors was reduced to 4.0, a reduction of 75 percent. Peter's mean baseline level of challenging behavior was 14.8; after intervention, his mean behavior was under 2. For Peter, a social skill teaching approach was chosen, but a different intervention may have also worked. After four weeks, the teacher reported that Peter's behavior had maintained.

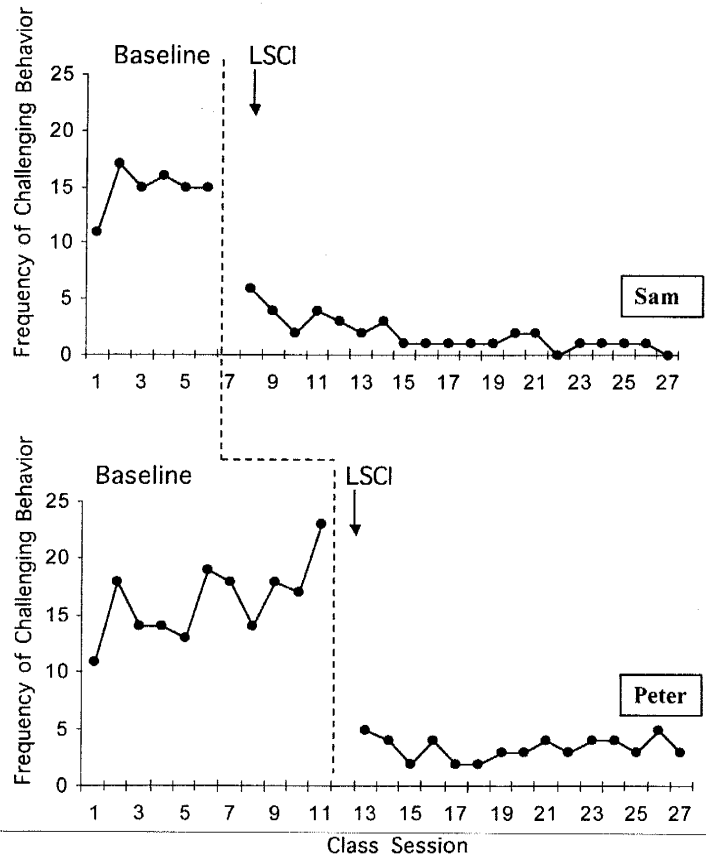
For the two girls, similar results were found. Charlotte showed a remarkable improvement in behavior: During baseline, an average of 22 events of challenging behavior was observed; the frequency was reduced to a mean of 4 instances per lesson after the Red Flag intervention.

For Flo, two Life Space Crisis Interventions were necessary. During baseline, an average of 20 instances of target behavior was observed, which reduced to 8.5 after the first intervention. After the second LSCI, Flo's mean challenging behavior was 2. Possibly, the second type of intervention should have been applied the first time. In each case, a percent of non-overlapping data (PND) of 100 was calculated, reflecting a highly effective intervention.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to assess the effects of Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) on the disruptive behavior of four students with learning handicaps in a German special school. This research contributes to the literature on LSCI in that it provides a direct measure of the effects of the intervention on student behavior. Also unique is the use of the intervention with students with lower than average IQ. Results suggest that life space crisis interview was very effective at reducing disruptive behavior for these students and that results were maintained. Naslund (1987) reported that students with higher IQ scores seemed to benefit more from LSCI than those with lower IQ. In this study, students with lower IQ scores seemed to also benefit greatly from the intervention. Future researchers may want to assess the effects of LSCI on direct measures of the behavior of students with average IQ.

Figure 1

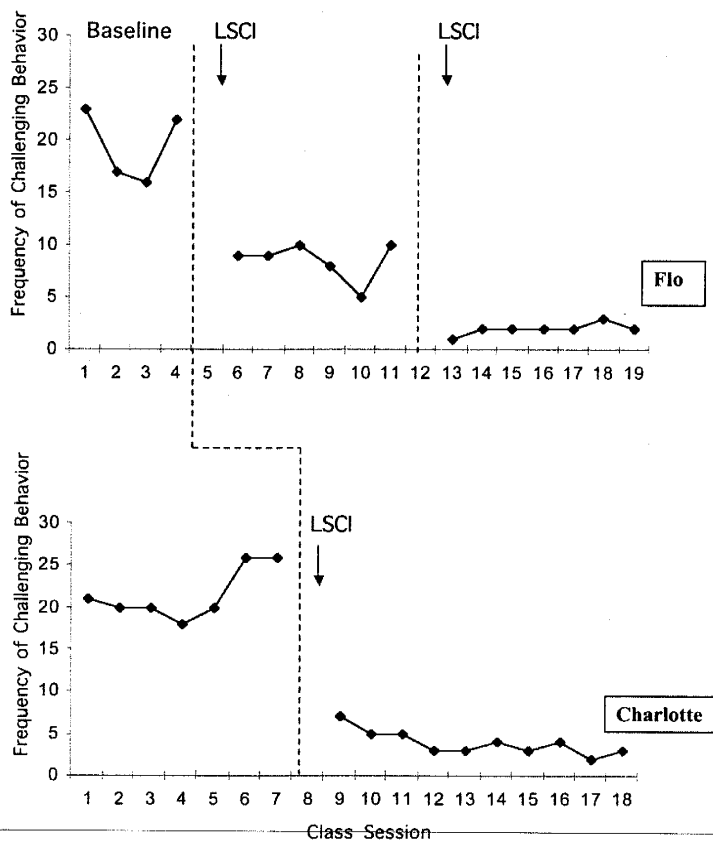


For three of the students in the present study, a single life space crisis interview was all that was needed to facilitate drastic improvement in behavior. The fourth student showed improvement after two interventions. This is fewer than reported by other research (e.g., Naslund, 1987; DeMagistris & Imber, 1980; Dawson, 2003). In our study, the classroom teacher, who also served as principal of the school, conducted the interventions. It is possible that the students developed an improved relationship with the teacher/principal and that this increased the effectiveness of the intervention. According to Wood & Long (1991),

Relationship is connection. ...an adult's effectiveness with students is in large part built on the quality of the connection – conveyed attitudes of affirmation, respect, care, enhancement, and just plain liking. Effective LSI is built on these dimensions of relationship. (p. 15)

It is possible that the teacher created this connection with her students through the crisis intervention process and that this facilitated a change in behavior.

Figure 2



Other variables may have also contributed to the reduction in behaviors. It is possible that the LSCIs, in combination with the behavior management system already in place, were more effective than it would have been if used in isolation. It is also unclear if parent involvement contributed to the effectiveness of the intervention. For example, Charlotte's parents were actively involved and may have contributed to the positive effects observed, whereas the parents of other students were less involved. Future researchers may want to assess the effects of these variables on the effectiveness of LSCI.

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